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Wryly Noted-Books About Books

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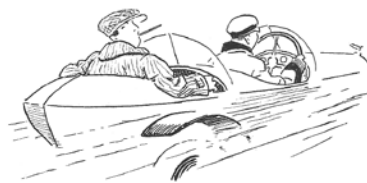
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Wryly Noted — Books About Books

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The Book Lovers' Miscellany by **Claire Cock-Starkey**. (ISBN: 978-1-85124-471-3, University of Chicago Press 2017, 136 pages, \$17.50.)

This short work is a little like the *Guinness Book of World Records* and *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* all rolled into one but dedicated solely to the book world. Like those two books, *Miscellany* is composed of lists of bests, firsts, and mosts. It is an ideal bedside companion, easily digested one page at a time. Here you will learn that the bestselling book of all time after the *Bible* is *Tale of Two Cities* by **Dickens** with two hundred million copies sold worldwide, the youngest bestselling author is **S.E. Hinton** who composed her book *The Outsiders* at fifteen years of age, and there is other useful information, such as the color coding for early **Penguin** paperbacks. The author is fond of making lists such as the most influential academic books of all time, the most frequently banned books, or unfinished novels and lost works by famous authors. The author was series editor for all six editions of **Schott's Almanac** and previously published a collection of curious facts about the **Oxford University Library** entitled *Bodleianalia*.

The following are some fascinating facts from this fun book:

The Scriptorium was the dedicated room in a monastery where scribes copied and illuminated books, especially Bibles. Most books were worked on by multiple hands and research has found that as many as eight various scribes would be at work on one manuscript, changing hands sometimes in mid-sentence.

Vellum is derived from the French word veau, or veal. Vellum was usually reserved for the best books and manuscripts. Of the surviving forty-nine copies of the original **Gutenberg Bible**, twelve are printed on vellum.

"Quills as writing implements were developed around the sixth century AD and quickly superseded the reed pen and metal stylus as the implement of choice for writing books. The best quills were taken from the flight feathers of live birds, plucked in the spring from the left wing (because the feathers curved away, making it easier for a right handed scribe to use). Goose feathers were most commonly used but swan feathers were considered superior, in part due to their rarity; feathers of crows were used for making fine lines. Quill pens needed regular sharpening with a knife, hence the origin of the word penknife."

Medieval illuminated manuscripts ingeniously made use of many natural elements to create their bright "illuminated" colors. Yellow was provided by saffron, blue by woad (derived

from leaves of *Isatis tinctora*, the same pigment early tribes of Britain used to dye their faces) and ultramarine, derived from lapis lazuli imported from Afghanistan.

The **Frankfurt Book Fair** has been running for over five hundred years, thought to have begun in 1478. The original **Shakespeare** folio was even offered for sale there.

The **Stationers Company** was started in the fifteenth century when writers, binders, and illuminators set up stalls or "stations" to offer up their works around **St. Paul's Cathedral** in London. Because most of the vendors operated out of "stationary" stalls they came to be known as stationers.

The oldest book is an Etruscan work composed entirely of gold consisting of just six pages held together with gold rings. It is believed to date back to 660 BC and has yet to be translated.

Printing fonts were originally developed to mimic hand writing, but quickly developed their own styles which included narrower strokes and thinner serifs, allowing more white space on the page.

A new type of ink was developed by **Johannes Gutenberg** specifically for his printing enterprise. Most early books used his oil-based formula which resembled a varnish that consisted of carbon, titanium, zinc, and lead.

The earliest book bindings date from around the first century AD and were made from wood which was typically meant to hold a codex together for storing flat on a shelf.

Standard book sizes range from the smallest "crown" at 2-1/2 inches by 1-7/8 inches to the largest "royal folio" at 20 inches by 12-1/2 inches. For oversized books, terminology ranges from "elephant folio" to "atlas folio" to the largest size, "double elephant" for books up to 50 inches high. Then we have the "outliers" with the smallest book ever created *Tiny Tim from Turnip Town* whose thirty pages can only be read on an electron microscope and the largest book ever created a 2012 text on **Mohammed** whose forty-seven pages weigh in at 3,307 pounds and which measures 197 inches by 317 inches.

Signed books vary in value from inscribed, or presentation copies, which are desirable based on the notoriety of the dedicatee, to association copies

which are dedicated to someone associated with the production of the book, to a dedication copy which is signed over to the person to whom the book is dedicated to in print.

First editions are tricky to confirm, as many publishers have their own nomenclature and dating methods for their print runs. It is best to consult an expert in this area.

ISBN identification of books was developed as "Standard Book Numbering" in 1965 by **Gordon Foster**, professor of statistics at **Trinity College**, Dublin. The original nine-digit code was adopted by the ISO in 1970 as ISBN when it became a ten-digit code. The first three digits of the newer thirteen-digit code are a standard prefix of 978 or 979. The next group of between one and five numbers marks the geographical area of the publisher, then the next numbers indicate the publisher, followed by numbers indicating the edition and specific format of a work and the final digit is a "check digit" that makes the ISBN valid.

One particularly interesting portion of the book is dedicated to lost books by esteemed authors, such as *Cardenio* by **Shakespeare**. It is speculated that it was based on **Don Quixote**. **Homer** apparently authored a comic epic poem entitled *Margites* and we only know of its existence from other writers. The poem was praised by **Aristotle**. **James Joyce's** first work *A Brilliant Career* written in 1900 was a play that was praised by **William Archer**, a drama critic, but **Joyce** chose to destroy it. All that remains is the title page and dedication "To my own Soul I dedicate the first true work of my life."

World Book Day was established by **UNESCO** and first celebrated in 1995 on April 23, a date chosen because it is the death date of **William Shakespeare**, **Cervantes**, and **Garcilaso de la Vega**.

Dust jackets on books were first used from the 1830s when they served to protect the ornate bindings underneath. Modern dust jackets can add immeasurably to the value of first editions, as in the case of *The Great Gatsby*, where a pristine copy can add up to one hundred thousand dollars to the value of the book.

With the above tidbits I have only hinted at the amazing facts gleaned from this slim tome. *The Book Lovers' Miscellany* would make a great addition to your bedside reading or to your library's "books about books" section. 🐼